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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4229
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6285
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 8987
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 4860
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0999
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 2392
RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002655

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2018
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR CASC TH
SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL DEADLOCK: BANGKOK QUIET AS SAMAK
PUSHES FOR REFERENDUM

REF: A. BANGKOK 02643 (PM SAMAK DEFIANT)
     ¶B. BANGKOK 02619 (STATESMEN SEEK KING'S APPROVAL)
     ¶C. BANGKOK 02610 (MIDNIGHT CLASH)
     ¶D. BANGKOK 02593 (POLICE UNABLE TO TAKE CONTROL)
     ¶E. BANGKOK 02575 (WARRANTS BUT NO ARRESTS)
     ¶F. BANGKOK 02555 (POLICE AND PAD COEXIST)
     ¶G. BANGKOK 02546 (PAD PROTESTS CHALLENGE PM SAMAK)
     ¶H. BANGKOK 02405 (TENSIONS ESCALATE AT THAI PROTESTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Bangkok was mostly quiet September 5, despite
a motorcycle gunfire attack on university students marching
on Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej's house during the evening
of September 4, as the House focused on passing a budget,
and the Senate moved the national referendum bill forward for
committee review. PM Samak pushed a fast track approach to
hold a referendum on whether the government or the People's
Alliance for Democracy (PAD) offered the right approach to
resolving the crisis. Ambassador engaged DPM Sahas Bunditkul
on the political situation, repeating the U.S. desire to see
the political situation resolved peacefully and within the
constitutional framework. Sahas said that PM Samak still
planned to travel to New York the week of September 21 for
UNGA, and that he hoped a new Foreign Minister, expected to
be retired diplomat Saroj Chavanaviraj, would be in place by
then. Media commentators speculated that there was growing
tension between Prime Minister Samak and Army Commander
Anuphong Paochinda after the Cabinet September 4 passed an
emergency announcement that transferred power for use of
force and troop deployment to the Prime Minister. DPM Sahas
and a journalist separately suggested that Anuphong was
quietly trying to broker behind the scene talks.

¶2. (C) Comment: Students becoming involved in the ongoing
political struggle is a new and potentially important
development, since this is the first time they have
affiliated themselves with the PAD anti-government protests
since PAD's founding in 2006. Students were active figures
in past political protests in 1973, 1976 and 1992.
Speculation over Samak-Anuphong tensions may reflect a slow
news day more than actual problems. We find it unlikely that
Samak would leave the country for a week in the middle of a
serious political crisis to go to New York, particularly
given that former PM Thaksin was deposed in the September
2006 coup while in NY. End Summary and Comment.

BANGKOK QUIET, FOCUS ON PARLIAMENT

¶3. (SBU) With the government focused on parliamentary
considerations, Bangkok was mostly quiet September 5. The
Senate passed the first reading of a bill that would allow
referenda to be conducted in accordance with the 2007
Constitution. This is an important first step towards PM
Samak's aspiration to hold a national referendum on a choice
between the positions of the government or the People's
Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protest movement (ref A).
Critics in the Senate, House, and in civil society decried
the expected cost (an estimated 2 billion baht - $65 million)
and questioned the legality, but Samak vowed to proceed,
telling DCM at the British National Day reception late
September 4 that he hoped to fast track the referendum and
hold it in October.

Returning to business as usual?

¶4. (C) Ambassador met with DPM Sahas, one of the few figures
in the government and PPP party seen as loyal to Samak rather
than Thaksin, September 5 to reiterate U.S. concerns that the
crisis be resolved peacefully and within the framework of the
Constitution. Sahas, currently operating out of the Foreign
Ministry while Government House is occupied by the PAD, said
that he was in charge of the Foreign Ministry until a new
Foreign Minister was approved. (note: MFA PermSec Virasak
Futrakul earlier informed Ambassador that Saroj Chavanaviraj,
a retired former MFA PermSec, would be nominated. Media

later reported that Samak had forwarded Saroj's name to King
Bhumiphol for approval. See below for a brief bio).

¶5. (C) Sahas said that PM Samak still planned on traveling to
New York for UNGA the week of September 21; his speech was
scheduled for September 25. "Whoever is Foreign Minister"
would also go; if a new Minister was not in place, Sahas said
that he would go in his acting capacity.

TENSION BETWEEN SAMAK AND ANUPONG?

¶6. (SBU) The Thai media and the local rumor mill today
focused on the outcome of a September 4 special cabinet
meeting in which the Cabinet approved two emergency
announcements, one of which seemingly shifts some power to PM
Samak and away from Army Chief Anuphong by giving the prime
minister, who serves concurrently as Defense Minister, the
right to use military force and deploy troops. Anupong
canceled a 10:00 am press conference for a emergency meeting
with Samak, amidst speculation that there may be growing
tension between the PM and the Army Commander.

¶7. (C) Dr. Panitan Watthanayakorn, a security expert at
Chulalongkorn University, publicly said the moves left open
the question of who has the power deploy military force under
the state of emergency. Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters
confirmed our belief that the transfer of power was not
significant as Samak, as Defense Minister, already possessed
the power to use force and deploy troops.

¶8. (C) In contrast to the rumors of Samak-Anuphong tensions,
DPM Sahas told Ambassador that Anuphong was quietly seeking
to broker behind the scenes discussions, but that the effort
would take time. Journalist Kavi Chongkittavorn also
suggested to us that Anuphong was attempting such an effort,
claiming that PM Chief of Staff Tirapol Noparumpa, another
Samak insider, and Somthang Boonrawd, a journalist close to
PAD, had been floated as possible intelocutors.

STUDENTS JOIN THE FRAY

¶9. (SBU) In an interesting development, students began to join the PAD protests and hold separate anti-government rallies for the first time September 4 since PAD anti-government rallies started in 2006. A group of approximately one hundred Ramkhamhaeng University students began a march to Prime Minister's Samak's residence on the evening of September 4 to call for him to resign, but the march was interrupted at approximately 2130 when a gunman on a motorcycle fired on the group, injuring two students with gunshot wounds in the legs.

¶10. (C) Comment: The attack followed the classic modus operandi of hired gunmen in Thailand. The burst of student involvement may have been sparked by recent comments by PM Samak and Somchai Wongsawat, Minister of Education and former-prime minister Thaksin's brother-in-law, that were seen as an attempt to discourage students from involvement in politically-oriented protests. Ironically, the comments may have had the opposite effect, stirring long-absent student activism to life.

SAROJ - BRIEF BIO INFO

¶11. (C) Saroj Chavanaviraj is a retired career diplomat who served as MFA Permanent Secretary from 1997-99 during the Chuan Leekpai government; he subsequently served as Ambassador to France and a Ministerial adviser. Saroj received a B.A. and M.A. from UCLA. His earlier experience as MFA Director-General for ASEAN Affairs might stand the MFA and the Thai Government in good stead during the ongoing Thai Chairmanship of ASEAN. However, the Embassy found Saroj a dour and unhelpful figure during his PermSec stint, an opinion shared by some Thai observers of international affairs such as the Nation's Kavi.

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JOHN